United Nations E/CN.6/2019/NGO/99

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
26 November 2018

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Sixty-third session
11–22 March 2019
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by Community Education Services (CES) Canada, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

18-20186 (E) 041218

Please recycle

Statement

The Power of Educating Girls

Empowering women in society is more than an ideal; it is a basic human right. Among the most important of these rights is education. Educating a girl can result in transforming an entire community. A just and a free society begins to emerge when that happens. In countries like Kenya, there is a strong movement, particularly through non-governmental organizations to support the girl child, providing hope through education.

Former United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon stated, "Educating girls and giving them the tools to shape their own future has an incredible multiplier effect on economic growth. It leads to increased prosperity not just for individuals but for their communities and their societies. It provides returns for decades."

Community Education Services Canada has worked in rural Kenyan communities to ensure that those orphaned by HIV/Aids and who are poor and needy are given opportunity to learn and develop to the highest degree possible. Bright, motivated young people are now studying at secondary and post-secondary levels. Since 2004, over 3,000 scholarships have allowed youth to move forward in their lives. Of that number over 50 per cent have been directed to young women.

To the extent we believe in gender equity and allow access to education for girls, we open new doors of opportunity for employment, economic and social development. When women are empowered there will slowly emerge a new social contract and a healthier society. Moving forward, the strategy must involve a demonstrated passion and a relentless commitment to ending poverty. Providing access to education is more than an act of charity; it is an essential component of justice and the promotion of equal rights for all.

For many rural girls mired in poverty, with limited exposure to empowering role models, and side-lined by systemic political patronage, answers to social problems seem insurmountable. Of particular concern to women is HIV/Aids, substance abuse, lack of nutrition, corruption, family breakdowns and violence against women and children. It is critical therefore that solutions be developed by Kenyans for Kenyans and that participants include women.

There is a multiplier effect when girls achieve a secondary or post-secondary education. When one girl is educated, given time she will influence seven others and push them towards a better life. The reality is however, that so many girls in Kenya are raised in poverty and are consistently denied even a basic education. Educated young women have the energy and creativity to shape their future. They are inclined to use their education for good, protecting the environment, promoting democracy, defending human rights and fighting for equality between men and women.

Culture plays a central role in the political, economic and social life of communities. Local culture is a dynamic that has evolved through generations and therefore takes time to change. Retrogressive traditions such as female genital mutilation and early childhood marriage can only change as Kenyans re-define positive aspects of their culture. Creating a society where girls are valued to the same extent as boys is key to building a sense of belonging and identity to the family structure. Rooted in Kenyan culture is respect for its elders; and so any positive change must involve the senior generation, a group that typically has not had opportunity to attend school.

A critical component of education is leadership training and skill development. Community Education Services Kenya has created a leadership scholarship program

called "Shaping Kenya's Future". Topics include interpersonal skill development, character building and goal setting designed to promote independent learning and proactive problem solving. Through the setting of realistic and attainable goals, scholars will be able to measure and further develop their career and academic potential and aspire to a brighter future.

The Community Education Services School of Continuing Education ensures that an equal number of girls to boys will participate. Young women are benefitting and our experience has been that graduates of the program are taking on leadership roles in both private and public employment settings. Some have become involved in local and national elections as scrutineers and advisors; while others have experience as mentors, counsellors and teacher assistants within our school communities. A number have made their mark as entrepreneurs and business people. Alumnus of the leadership program are engaged in extracurricular education activities in schools promoting such topics as community health, sanitation and hygiene, healthy living and prevention of HIV/Aids.

This leadership initiative builds on skills not taught in the school curriculum. It encourages young people, both girls and boys to view themselves as "nation builders". It seeks to exemplify the leadership values they wish to see in their own leaders; namely, justice, integrity and trust. Topics explore the impact of using intellectual imagination, personal initiative, high level achievement and inner strength to overcome adversity. All participants have their own gift to bring, all can participate, all will make a difference.

Challenges we face in this 21st century can only be overcome through a combined effort to educate girls and boys together. They are a gift to the world and in large part our hope and our future. The life of the planet and the economic viability of societies that make up our world depend on it. This is the day and the time to revive, renew and shift our collective thinking. Education for all is a moral imperative, absolutely essential to our future. Tomorrow's leaders are seated in the classrooms of today. Let's give them the best possible chance to be the visionaries and game-changers our world so desperately needs.